

Amendments alter districts in Shreveport and Rapides

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BATON ROUGE — After heated debate, the House Monday removed a new minority district in Shreveport that had been added in committee and granted Rapides Parish lawmakers' request to realign their districts.

But the arrangement that Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, worked out with 51-49 House approval could be in jeopardy today as Rep. Frank Howard, R-Many, pushes an amendment that would undo the deal and alter other districts.

Howard's proposal will be first up when the House convenes today at 10 a.m. to resume debate on HBI by Speaker of the House Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

Newly elected Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, urged the House to remove the new minority district from the bill. He said the black population in Shreveport has not increased since the 2000 Census, so the number of black districts should not increase.

He said creating a new minority district "defies logic" and that the Voting Rights Act "does not affect only minorities."

And, Seabaugh said to the majority Republican House, with the adjustments required to implement the new district, "I'm not going to live in the district I was elected to represent."

If the minority district remained and Seabaugh did decide to run, he and fellow Republican Rep. Richie Burford of Stonewall would have been in a district against each other.

The House voted 57-46 — not quite a straight partisan split — to return Tucker's bill to the way it was filed with 29 minority districts.

Districts

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District 3 Rep. Barbara Norton, of Shreveport, joined white legislators in arguing to strip the new district. She said she was concerned that it weakened her district so much that she or any other minority couldn't get re-elected.

Democrats Bobby Badon, of Carencro, and Jim Fannin, of Jonesboro, and independent Joel Robideaux, of Lafayette, also voted with Republicans. Republican Brett Geymann, of Lake Charles, and independents Michael Jackson, of Baton Rouge, and Ernest Wooton, of Belle Chasse, voted with Democrats.

In an early morning Republican Caucus meeting, two top members of the Jindal administration urged Republicans to remove the district that Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, added in committee.

Rep. Jane Smith, R-Shreveport, who chairs the caucus, said she invited Gov. Bobby Jindal's chief of staff, Timmy Teepell, and his executive counsel, Stephen Waguespack, so they

could voice the administration's position on the issue.

She said Republicans need to look out for their districts, too, to see that their voting strength is not diluted. She said Republicans have gained a majority and don't want to lose it.

The administration's involvement was contrary to the governor's opening speech in which he urged lawmakers to take a bipartisan approach to redistricting and not let party politics interfere, as it has in Washington, D.C.

He said they should "come together as Louisianans first, not as Republicans or Democrats first."

He also indicated that he would stay out of legislative business, but he earlier said he wanted two vertical Congressional districts in the northern section of the state.

The minority district issue split the Caddo delegation.

"The numbers are not there," Norton said. "It would dilute the minority strength in District 3 and voters would not be able to elect a minority."

Proponents of keeping the district, including mi-

nority Reps. Roy Burrell and Patrick Williams, of Shreveport, said decreasing the black population in Norton's district from 88.7 percent to 63.7 percent left plenty enough voting strength for a minority candidate to win.

"No one needs 88 percent or 89 percent to win in a district," said Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, who chairs the Legislative Black Caucus.

Gallot argued that the U.S. Justice Department, which must review the state's plan to comply with the Voting Rights Act, is not going to like that the House had the opportunity to create a minority district and didn't do it.

In a surprise move earlier in the day, the House approved creating three legislative districts within Rapides Parish instead of splitting it among four representatives, as Tucker's bill originally did.

Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, offered the amendment so he and Reps. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria, and Chris Hazel, R-Ball, could represent the entire parish.

HBI, as approved by committee, would have split the parish among four

representatives and shifted districts so that Roy was to run against Rep. James Armes, D-Leesville.

Under the amendment co-authored by Roy, Armes, Dixon, Hazel and Rep. Robert Johnson, D-Marksville, the Alexandria representatives keep roughly their present districts. But Rep. Rick Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, and Rep. Billy Chandler, R-Dry Prong, would run against each other.

Nowlin and Chandler argued against the amendment.

Roy recounted for the House how Tucker's plans initially had him running against Nowlin, then against Armes, then Dixon and, before the amendment, against Armes again. With his amendment, he's in a district by himself.

But as the House adjourned for the day, Rep. Frank Howard was proposing an amendment that would undo Roy's amendment and affect several other districts, including Seabaugh's, which was restored when the Shreveport minority district was removed.